

Much Ado About Nothing

By William Shakespeare

Characters

Beatrice - Leonato's niece and Hero's cousin. Beatrice is "a pleasant-spirited lady" with a very sharp and clever tongue. She is generous and loving, but, like Benedick, continually makes fun of other people. She wages a war of wits against Benedick, and often wins the battles. At the start of the play, she appears happy never to marry.

Benedick - An aristocratic soldier who has recently been fighting under Don Pedro, and a friend of Don Pedro and Claudio. Benedick is very witty, always making jokes and puns. He carries on a "merry war" of wits with Beatrice, but at the beginning of the play he swears he will never fall in love or marry.

Claudio - A young soldier who has won great acclaim fighting under Don Pedro during the recent wars. Claudio falls in love with Hero upon his return to Messina. His unfortunately suspicious nature makes him quick to believe evil rumors and quick to despair and take revenge.

Hero - The beautiful young daughter of Leonato and the cousin of Beatrice. Hero is lovely, gentle, and kind. She falls in love with Claudio when he falls for her, but when Don John slanders her and Claudio rashly takes revenge, she suffers terribly.

Don Pedro - An important nobleman from Aragon, sometimes referred to as "the Prince." Don Pedro is a longtime friend of Leonato, Hero's father, and is also close to the soldiers who have been fighting under him—the younger Benedick and the very young Claudio. Don Pedro is generous, courteous, intelligent, and loving to his friends, but he is also quick to believe evil of others and hasty to take revenge. He is the most politically and socially powerful character in the play.

Leonato - A respected, wealthy, elderly noble at whose home, in Messina, Italy, the action is set. Leonato is the father of Hero and the uncle of Beatrice. As governor of Messina, he is second in social power only to Don Pedro.

Don John - The illegitimate brother of Don Pedro; sometimes called "the Bastard." Don John is melancholy and sullen by nature, and he creates a dark scheme to ruin the happiness of Hero and Claudio. He is the villain of the play; his evil actions are motivated by his envy of his brother's social authority.

Margaret - Hero's serving woman, who unknowingly helps Borachio and Don John deceive Claudio into thinking that Hero is unfaithful. Though she is honest, she does have some dealings with the villainous world of Don John: her lover is the mistrustful and easily bribed Borachio.

Borachio - An associate of Don John. Borachio is the lover of Margaret, Hero's serving woman. He conspires with Don John to trick Claudio and Don Pedro into thinking that Hero is unfaithful to Claudio. His name means "drunkard" in Italian.

Conrad - One of Don John's more intimate associates, entirely devoted to Don John.

Dogberry - The constable in charge of the Watch, or chief policeman, of Messina. Dogberry is very sincere and takes his job seriously, but he has a habit of using exactly the wrong word to convey his meaning. He tries, unsuccessfully, to speak in the elaborate language of the noblemen.

Verges - The deputy to Dogberry, chief policeman of Messina.

Antonio - Leonato's elderly brother, and Hero and Beatrice's uncle.

Balthasar - A waiting man in Leonato's household and a musician. Balthasar flirts with Margaret at the masked party and helps Leonato, Claudio, and Don Pedro trick Benedick into falling in love with Beatrice. Balthasar sings the song "Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more" about accepting men's infidelity as natural.

Ursula - One of Hero's waiting women.

I. Background

Much Ado about Nothing was probably performed in 1598 or 1599. By this time, Shakespeare was already a well-established playwright. Much Ado, Twelfth Night, and As You Like It are considered to be his transitional comedies. Previous comedies such as Love's Labours Lost and Two Gentlemen of Verona do not demonstrate the polished dialogue or tight action of these three comedies. After these three plays, Shakespeare wrote more tragic works, some of which mirror the themes found in Much Ado.

II. Plot

Much Ado About Nothing takes place in Messina, Italy, at the home of Leonato, the Governor. Don Pedro, the prince, has just defeated his illegitimate brother Don John, with the help of Claudio and Benedick. Upon their arrival in Messina, Claudio expresses to Don Pedro that he loves Hero, Leonato's only child. As a reward for Claudio's bravery in battle, Don Pedro woos Hero for Claudio and the two young lovers prepare to marry. Benedick reacquaints himself with Beatrice with whom he argues relentlessly.

Don Pedro, Leonato, Claudio and Hero conspire to have Beatrice and Benedick overhear conversations one about the other. Hero and Ursula converse that Benedick is sick in love for Beatrice, knowing she is eavesdropping on the conversation. Similarly, Don Pedro, Leonato, and Claudio lay the same trap for Benedick who is hiding in a hedge while they talk of Beatrice's love for Benedick.

In the meantime, Don John and his co-conspirators, Borachio and Conrad, plot to have Claudio and Don Pedro overhear a romantic conversation between Borachio and Margaret disguised as Hero. Upon seeing this illicit exchange, Claudio and Don Pedro swear to denounce Hero at the wedding.

Dogberry and his watchmen overhear Borachio talk about the plot after it has happened. The villains are arrested, but Leonato is too busy with wedding preparations to hear the officers' report.

The wedding day arrives; Claudio rejects Hero. Hero faints and Claudio, Don John and Don Pedro leave. Leonato, Hero, Benedick, Beatrice and the Friar agree to pretend that Hero is dead. If the slander can be overturned, she can re-emerge. If not, she can be hidden away.

Thanks to the watchmen, the plot to slander Hero is revealed to all. In his shame, Claudio agrees to marry whomever Leonato desires. Leonato tells Claudio he has a niece who much resembles Hero.

Claudio agrees to the marriage, and is delighted when the original Hero emerges. Beatrice and Benedick also agree to marry, and only the prince is left without a wife.

III. Themes

"Much Ado About Nothing" is a phrase still used today, to mean "a big fuss over something unimportant". In early modern English, "nothing" would be pronounced "noting." "Nothing" could mean "nothing;" "nothing" could denote "noting" or eavesdropping; "nothing" was also a slang term for female genitalia, which was "nothing" compared to what a man had. So, the play revolves around instances of deception and eavesdropping coupled with sexual politics. The action is based on hiding and overhearing.

First, much is made of overhearing conversations about love and sex in this piece. In fact, most of the action is a result of someone overhearing something which is often a lie. Ironically, Don Pedro begins the lies by wooing Hero disguised as Claudio, a harmless lie which wins Hero for the young soldier. Don Pedro, Claudio, Leonato, and Hero conspire a second time to frame a lie which will make Benedick believe that Beatrice loves him and vice versa. Though Claudio and Don Pedro actually start the deceptive activity of the play and lie throughout, it never occurs to them that anyone would lie to them. Thus, Don John and Borachio are successful in their plot against the prince and his men.

Second, Much Ado about Nothing clearly depicts a battle of the sexes. Much of the comedy of this play comes from the fast-paced exchanges between Beatrice and Benedick (and, in contrast, the mangled English of Dogberry). Beatrice and Benedick carry on a "merry war" of words which hides their affection for one another, but demonstrates to onlookers that they are a perfect match for each other.

In production, the themes of deception and eavesdropping cannot be overlooked. The masked ball in Act II underscores the deception theme.

IV. Comedy or Tragedy?

This piece is not a "pure" comedy. Much of the action involves vindictiveness and cruelty. Claudio and Don Pedro choose to publicly slander Hero at her wedding. Even when they are proved wrong, the damage has already been done. The play has comic elements and a happy ending, but the road is treacherous along the way. Some scenes have great dramatic potential. Beatrice's impassioned request that Benedick "Kill Claudio" is one of the finest pieces of drama Shakespeare wrote.

Ultimately, however, the play is a comedy. Hero "dies" but returns to life to marry Claudio. Comedies often allow characters to confront death and overcome it.

V. Shakespeare and the Modern Audience

In viewing a Shakespearean production, an audience member should not try to hang on to every word spoken. The language is too unfamiliar. A viewer should relax and listen for a general understanding of the dialogue. Accept the fact that you won't catch every word. In the hands of actors who know what they are saying, audiences should have few problems understanding the play.

The plays are inherently dramatic. Keep in mind that Shakespeare's audience ran the gamut of wealthy, educated people to poor, illiterate peasants. In short, to be successful, he had to have something for everyone, intellectual as well as profane characters and themes, comic as well as dramatic moments.